DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 806 CG 031 568

AUTHOR Hansen, Catherine E.; Bennett, Curtis D.; Mathews, Brandi; Pender, Angie; McPhearson, Dale

TITLE Obsession and Compulsion Differences in College Majors and Classifications.

PUB DATE 2001-08-00

NOTE 10p.; Poster presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (109th, San Francisco, CA, August 24-28, 2001).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *College Students; Higher Education; Majors (Students); *Psychological Characteristics; *Psychological Patterns; Sex Differences; *Student Characteristics; Success

IDENTIFIERS *Obsessive Compulsive Behavior

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to assess whether students differed by major or classification on self-reported symptoms of obsession and compulsion. Though sex differences have not been found on this construct, it was expected that students with different majors would require different levels of such characteristics in order to be successful. It was also postulated that students would learn over time to become more obsessive and compulsive in order to succeed in college. Students were recruited from each of several majors. Students were also recruited so as to obtain representative groups of students from each of the freshman and senior classifications. Freshmen were significantly less obsessive and compulsive than seniors, as well as sophomores and juniors. It appears that the students might not be as concerned about adopting such a style in their early college careers. They apparently learn to adopt such characteristics after that first year, however, from their older peers. Future research might collect a larger sample and query more specifically about majors. (Author)

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Obsession and Compulsion Differences in College Majors and Classifications

Catherine E. Hansen, Curtis D. Bennett, Brandi Mathews, Angie Pender, & Dale McPhearson

Northwestern State University

Poster Presentation at
Annual Convention of
American Psychological Association
August 24-28, 2001
San Francisco, CA

Address correspondence to:

Catherine E. Hansen, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
Northwestern State University
Natchitoches, LA 71497
318-357-5452
hansenc@nsula.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to assess whether students differed by major or classification on self-reported symptoms of obsession and compulsion. Though sex differences have not been found on this construct (Ferrari, 1995), it was expected that students with different majors would require different levels of such characteristics in order to be successful. It was also postulated that students would learn over time to become more obsessive and compulsive in order to succeed in college. Students were recruited from each of several majors. Students were also recruited so as to obtain representative groups of students from each of the freshman and senior classifications. Freshmen were significantly less obsessive and compulsive than seniors, as well as sophomores and juniors. There was no difference, however, between majors on obsessions and compulsions. It appears that the students might not be as concerned about adopting such a style in their early college careers. They apparently learn to adopt such characteristics after that first year, however, from their older peers. Future research might collect a larger sample and query more specifically about majors.

Obsessive-Compulsive Differences in College Majors and Classifications

There are two primary features highlighted for diagnosis of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). One, obsessions, are repeated and persistent thoughts, impulses or images that cause anxiety or distress and are both intrusive and inappropriate. The other, compulsions, are repetitive physical or mental actions that an individual feels compelled to perform in response to an obsession or according to rigid rules (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), 1994; Spengler & Jacobi, 1998). Though ther are many college students who suffer tremendously with the disorder (Sternberger & Burns, 1990, 1991; Vanin, 1990), the emphasis of the current study was the symptoms rather than the diagnosis.

As an illness, the obsessions an compulsions can be serious, potentially disruptive or destructive, and may lead to a myriad of problems (Parker & Stewart, 1994). The symptoms (or characteristics) alone, however, might be viewed as related positively to responsibility or adaptive capability (Rheaume, Freeston, Dugas, Letarte, et al, 1995; Scarrabelotti, Duck, & Dickerson, 1995). In moderate amounts, the characteristics may even allow greater success in academic and occupational realms.

The purpose of the current study was to assess whether students differed by major or classification on self-reported symptoms of obsession and compulsion. Though sex differences have not been found on this construct (Ferrari, 1995), it was expected that students would require different levels of such characteristics in order to be successful. It was also postulated that students would learn over time to become more obsessive and compulsive in order to succeed in college.

Method

Participants

A sample of 182 participants was recruited from a small university population from courses for extra credit. The mean age of the sample was 22.13 (SD = 6.77). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 77. One hundred twenty-two were women (67%) and sixty were men (33%). One hundred twenty-one (66.3%) were reportedly European American, 50 (27.6%) were African American, and 21 (6.1%) reported having other ethnic/racial backgrounds. Participants were asked to state their class standing and it was found that 23.5% (n = 43) reported being freshmen, 15.8% (n = 29) were sophomores, 23.5% (n = 43) reported being juniors, and 36.1% (n = 66) were seniors.

Mean household income reported was $49,000 (SD = $56,000) with a reported range from $0 to $350,000. All participants were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Materials

Two instruments were employed for the current study. The first was a general demographic questionnaire to determine basic sample characteristics such as age, race, and sex. The other instrument was the well-known Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale (YBOCS). For the purposes of the current study, the YBOCS was converted into a self-report instrument. Where relevant, depending upon the items, three response formats were provided: 1) yes/no; 2) a) No problem with activity..., b) Activity takes me twice as long as most people..., or c) Activity takes me three times as long as most people...; and 3) a) Current only, b) Past only, c) Both Current and past, or d) Never experienced.

Procedure

Students were recruited from each major, with psychology being one. Students were also recruited so as to obtain representative groups of students from each one of the freshman and senior classifications. At the time of administration, each student received a consent form and questionnaire packet. Volunteers participated in one session requiring approximately 20 minutes after which they received a debriefing sheet. This was performed in a group format.

Results

First a comparison was made between freshmen and seniors in terms of their obsessive and compulsive symptoms on the YBOCS. Seniors reported significantly more obsessive and compulsive symptoms than did freshmen, ($t_{(63)} = -2.252$, $p = .028$, 2-tailed).

Secondly, a comparison was made between college majors in terms of their YBOCS scores. There were, however, no significant differences found between the different majors ($F_{(7, 156)} = .262$, $p = .968$, 2-tailed).

Discussion

Not only were there significant differences between freshman and seniors, there were significant differences between the freshmen and all of the classes. It may be that because freshmen are newly adjusting to college life, independence, and issues of self-regulation that it takes them the first year to learn to decrease the potentially wild social life and begin the focus upon successful academic endeavors. It may be that they learn to become more obsessive and compulsive from upper level peers in order to become more successful in college academically.

It is conceivable that students might be taught such a style during high school. It is also possible that high school counselors might recommend to high school seniors that they work a

year before entering school, or recommend that only the students who already exhibit obsessive or compulsive tendencies directly continue their academic careers.

There were no significant differences between students with different declared college majors. It is quite probable that the sample sizes were too small. Also, students could have been queried for more specific types of majors rather than the broad categories as was done. Of course, it is possible that there truly were not differences between the groups. Larger samples will provide more confidence regarding this finding. College success in general requires diligent work, and this is the case regardless of the major concentration of study.

In future research, it will be necessary to attempt to obtain more students from a variety of different majors. It will also be necessary to query more specifically for majors rather the broader categories as were employed in the present study (e.g. visual arts or music rather than the overall category of creative arts).

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Numbers of Participant Scores on the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale by Classification

Classification	M	SD	n
Freshmen	126.18	28.33	39
Sophomores	140.07	17.19	29
Juniors	139.30	16.21	40
Seniors	137.97	20.38	61

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations and Numbers of Participant Scores on the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale by Major

Classification	M	SD	n
Business	133.75	29.28	16
Social/Behavior Science	136.99	18.09	70
Nursing	133.32	20.09	22
Other	134.28	24.65	25
Undecided	136.85	26.11	20